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June 16, 2008

Revisiting Abe Lincoln's first Del. visit

Eight score years ago, U. S. Rep. Abraham Lincoln made an "eloquent and patriotic speech" in Wilmington, an occasion remembered last week with the dedication of a historical plaque near the spot where he spoke. The "lone star of Illinois" received "three hearty cheers" from the assembled multitude, according to a contemporary newspaper account, but Lincoln later did not win Delaware's three electoral votes in both of his presidential elections.

Lincoln's June 10, 1848, appearance on the east platform of a market house on Fourth Street west of Market Street, came after the Whig Party nominated Zachary Taylor for the presidency in Philadelphia. The 39-year-old congressman lashed out at Democratic Pres. James K. Polk's "abuse of power" as he urged the election of Taylor, a hero of the Mexican War.

The year before, Taylor had won at Buena Vista, the battle after which his future secretary of state, John M. Clayton, also a Whig, would name his new home south of Wilmington.

Lincoln's connection to Delaware is being recalled as the country marks the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth on Feb. 12, 1809. A number of commemorative events are being planned by the Delaware commission, headed by Supreme Court Justice Henry duPont Ridgely.

After Lincoln was elected the 16th president, a Delaware delegation visited him in Philadelphia in February 1861 and invited him to stop in Wilmington on his way to be inaugurated. Lincoln claimed his schedule did not permit it. He was quoted as saying that his 1848 visit had led to "a fond remembrance of the hospitalities of the city on that occasion," a platitude worthy of a politician who had not won Delaware.

When Lincoln ran as the candidate of the new Republican Party in 1860, his 24 percent of the vote put him third to Southern Democrat John Breckenridge and Constitutional Union candidate John Bell. Historian Harold Hancock wrote that the Democrats played "upon the fears of Delawareans that the Republicans were the enemies of slavery, believers in Negro equality and dissolvers of the Union."

When Lincoln ran for re-election in 1864 and the Civil War was three bloody years old, Delaware was one of only three states (Kentucky and New Jersey were the others) that voted for Gen. George B. McClellan. Another historian, Stephen Lorant, says the Democrat would have been elected had the Union army not won some major pre-election victories. In Delaware McClellan received 8,767 votes to Lincoln's 8,155.

During his presidency Lincoln thought Delaware might become a model for emancipation. His plan would have used federal funds to compensate the cost of freeing Delaware's 1,800 slaves, who represented just 2 percent of the population and were outnumbered by far by the number of free blacks in Delaware. The plan was never carried out.

Details of Lincoln's connection to the state, and the source of some of this column, can be found on the fine Web site: www.abrahamlincolnclassroom.org. (See especially <http://www.abrahamlincolnclassroom.org/Library/newsletter.asp?ID=39&CRLI=119> target=new>Abraham Lincoln and Delaware.)

Historian and editor Carol Hoffecker will elaborate on that connection in an article next year in the magazine of the Delaware Historical Society.

Another Illinoisan made a campaign visit this year in Rodney Square. Although Barack Obama was

campaigning against Hillary Clinton, and would wind up winning Delaware's Democratic primary votes, he was already sharpening his ammunition against John McCain. He said he would "offer a clear and clean break from the failed policies of George W. Bush." Can we look forward to a series of presidential debates, echoing Lincoln's 1858 debate with Stephen Douglas on the issue of slavery when they were contending for the Senate seat from Illinois? Lincoln lost that election.

War on the Shore: Lincoln's Shore legacy

Written by Brice Stump Staff Writer
Mar. 23, 2014 |

delmarvanow.com

SEAFORD — To keep Abraham Lincoln from being kidnapped or murdered in 1861, before his inauguration, a plan was devised to bring the president-elect from his Illinois home through Seaford by rail, down the Nanticoke River by special boat, then up the Chesapeake Bay into Washington.

Jim Bowden, president of the Georgetown Historical Society, said Lincoln was a marked man. While doing historical research, Bowden came across a story that appeared in the Easton Gazette in January 27, 1872. It, in turn, had originally been published in the Philadelphia Press under the headline, "Mr. Lincoln's Journey to Washington." It was written by Samuel M. Fenton, once president of the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Rail Road, at the request of John Langdon Sibley, Harvard University librarian (1856-1877).

It details a curious bit of historical trivia that brought Seaford and the Nanticoke into considerable importance as Lincoln's route for safe passage to Washington for his swearing-in ceremony as president.

"The threat to Lincoln was quite real. And the plan was simple: to kill Lincoln before he could take the oath of office," Bowden said.

Working at the railroad at the same time as Fenton was I. R. Trimble, an engineer who would become a major general in the Confederate Army and make history for his role in Pickett's Charge during the Battle of Gettysburg.

"He and about 100 Confederate men were tasked with stopping Lincoln's passage to Washington," Bowden said. Trimble was assigned to burning bridges north of Washington to slow the movement of Union troops south. That plan, as detailed by Fenton, was greater than disrupting the president's way to his inauguration. If he got through to the capital, Southern forces, he believed, were ready to murder Lincoln.

According to Fenton, he told Gen. Winfield Scott that a safe route to Washington from Lincoln's Springfield, Ill., home, would be to come to Seaford from Philadelphia on what was then the Delaware Railroad.

Fenton's concerns and actions were based on an intimate conversation he had "in early 1861," with "Miss Dix, a philanthropist." Her work "alleviating the sufferings of the afflicted," he said, brought her in the company of prominent Southern men and the "structure of Southern society and also the workings of its political machinery."

She was, simply, a spy.

Miss Dix had a lot to tell Fenton in his office. "The sum of it all," he wrote, "was that there was then an extensive and organized conspiracy throughout the South to seize on Washington, with its archives and records, and then declare the Southern conspirators de facto the government of the United States. The whole was to be a coup d'etat. ... At the same time they were to cut off all modes of communication and thus prevent the transportation of troops to wrest the capital from the hands of the insurgents. Mr. Lincoln's inauguration was thus to be prevented or his life was to fall a sacrifice to the attempt at inauguration."

"I could not believe there was a plot to murder me," Lincoln supposedly said, as revealed by Robert Lincoln, the president's only surviving son, in an interview in 1923.

"The route through Seaford was highly considered but not used. Fenton, in the early hours of Feb 23, 1861, decided to use an alternative route from Philadelphia through Baltimore. That was the route selected," Bowden said. To confuse Rebels intent on killing the president, a "Lincoln look-alike" was employed.

"A man strongly resembling Mr. Lincoln had come down to the train," at one point to confuse would-be assassins, Fenton said. "Mr. Lincoln was safely inaugurated, after which I discharged our detective and also the semi military white-washers and all was quiet and serene again on the railroad," Fenton wrote.

"Nathaniel W. Gookin, my great-great-great-grandfather, was the engineer on the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Rail Road train that got Lincoln safely to Washington," said Tedd Slody of Fenwick Island. "The family story is that the president gave him a picture in appreciation for what he had done."

Bowden photographed an engraved print of Lincoln and, at the lower bottom right, the signature "A Lincoln."

"There were some other words on it at one time," Slody said, "but they have almost faded away, but you can still see the president's signature."

"This is a great story about how Seaford almost made history," Bowden said.

THE CASE OF SAMUEL BATSON HEARN TIED TO THE RAILROAD INAUGURATION

Shortly before 5 p.m. on Aug. 28, 1864, Samuel Batson Hearn got a close-up look at his casket. He also got to see the gallows from which he would be hung.

Just 23 years old, Hearn, of Delmar and Laurel, Del., was to be hung at Ft. McHenry, convicted of being a Confederate spy and blockade runner.

Though Hearn denied the allegations, a military commission in Baltimore found him guilty of "lurking as a spy, in and about the ports, quarters and encampments of the Army of the United States, within the state of Maryland," for attempting to pass from Maryland into Virginia without permission and for "aiding the transportation of goods" to Confederates in Virginia.

In April 1864, Hearn and four others were trying to get to the western shore of Virginia by boat in the Chesapeake Bay when they were spotted by Federal troops stationed on Deal Island.

When taken from his boat and interrogated at the camp of Co. B. First Eastern Shore Regiment of Maryland Volunteers at Deal Island, Hearn produced a furlough document granted "for 20 days to get a horse" by his Confederate commander. Hearn said he was visiting friends in Laurel and on his way back to Virginia to rejoin his command when he and four others, in a canoe in Holland Straits about four miles off Deal Island, were arrested by members of Co. B. The Federal men on gunboats boarded the canoe and found "two barrels of alcohol, two of rye whiskey, a 10-gallon keg of whiskey, two kegs of nails, a small quantity of leather and shoe thread, and a bundle with a suit of clothing in it resembling a Confederate suit without buttons," according to testimony given at a military commission in Baltimore on July 19, 1864.

Yet it was the furlough that proved that Hearn, arrested in civilian dress, was a Confederate soldier. He, like the others, was a private with Co. B, 1st Maryland Calvary Regiment of the Confederate Army. The commission found him guilty of the charges and sentenced him "to be hung by the neck until dead." Hearn, it was ordered, was to be "kept in solitary confinement in irons under strict guard at Fort McHenry."

On an August evening, Hearn stood before the gallows and beside his casket.

As the last minutes of his life were drawing to a close, Hearn, with Embert and Lyon, listened as the prison officer, who did not read the sentence of death, read one sentence: "The sentence in this case is commuted to confinement at hard labor in the penitentiary during the war. A Lincoln."

"I shall never forget the pleasure I felt at being sentenced to the penitentiary, as I had almost commenced to fell the rough hangman's rope around my neck," Hearn wrote years later. He was sentenced to hard labor at the penitentiary in Albany, N.Y., followed soon after by a prisoner exchange in January 1865.

How did it happened that his life was spared?

Lincoln owed a personal debt of kindness to John S. Gittings and his wife of Baltimore. Gittings, a banker and president of the Northern Central Railroad, was to host a visit by the president-elect and his family in February 1861.

In an account of the events of the time, published in the 1911 edition of the "Confederate Veteran," author Isaac Markers noted the president had to change his plans. "Information of an assassination plot induced Mr. Lincoln to leave his fellow travelers at Harrisburg, secretly return to Philadelphia by special train ... and there board the regular midnight train for Washington, where he arrived, unrecognized, in the early morning of Feb. 23."

This was the route taken in lieu of a proposed secret plan to have Lincoln pass through Seaford.

According to the Markers account, Mrs. Lincoln, with sons Willie, Robert and Tad, took the Harrisburg train to Baltimore. Pulling into the Baltimore station, Markers wrote, "Their train was greeted by an immense crowd which rolled in about it like a vast tidal wave. Some of the more unruly elements was bold enough to invade Mrs. Lincoln's private car until driven out by John Hay, who locked the door amidst an outburst of oaths and obscenity which swelled in intensity and volume when it became known Mr. Lincoln was not with the party ..."

Robert and others went to a hotel, but Mrs. Lincoln, Tad and Willie made their way to the Gittings carriage and were driven to the their home. "Hostile demonstrations, in the form of yells, cat calls and cheers for the Southern Confederacy, followed Mrs. Lincoln into the Gittings' house," Markers wrote. It was a peculiar friendship, given that Gittings, was "one of the earliest and strongest of Democrats" and his wife was "a woman of pronounced Southern sentiments." Nonetheless, they offered the Lincolns protection, hospitality, and "were handsomely entertained despite the rabble outside."

It was the Gittings, along with others several years later, who received a private audience late at night with President Lincoln to beg him to spare the lives of the three Confederate privates who were to be hung the following day. Lincoln, according to Markers, said, "Madam, I owe you a debt. You took my family into your home in the midst of a hostile mob. You gave the succor and helped them on their way. That debt has never been paid. I am glad of the opportunity to do so now, for I shall save the lives of these men."

Whether any of the three condemned men personally knew the Gittings or their associates who pled for their lives is a historical mystery. Yet it saved Hearn and his friends from certain death.

150 YEARS LATER, LINCOLN STILL MAKING NEWS ON THE SHORE

Almost 150 years later, Lincoln's ties to the shore remain in the news.

Paul Turner of near Salisbury has a special large Lincoln print made from a special 17-by-21-inch glass negative made of the president in 1863. For years, that rare sheet of glass was kept in a metal trunk that stayed under the bed of his late mother, Kathryn Rice Turner of Ocean Pines.

The glass negative shows a seated Lincoln resting his left arm on a marble-top table. It was made using the wet plate collodion process, an innovation in photography in the mid-1800s. Family lore holds that it had been taken by Rice Turner's grandfather, photographer Moses Parker Rice, in the Alexander Gardener studio in Washington, D.C.

"I knew about the big piece of glass Mom had under her bed in a trunk, but I was a teenager and not particularly interested in it," said Turner, a history teacher at James M. Bennett Middle School and University of Maryland Eastern Shore. "It came down to her through the family. My late brother, Ricey, was a Civil War buff, and word got to collectors in Gettysburg that she had it. Eventually the folks from the Smithsonian examined it. They could tell from the carpet shown in the negative that it had been taken in Alexander Gardner's photo studio in Washington.

"The Smithsonian people came down themselves with their white gloves and told her it was a real find, a one-of-a-kind thing. She wanted \$32,000, but they didn't want to give her that — you know how the government is," Turner said. "They wanted it for free."

After long negotiations, a deal was reached.

"Mom agreed to sell it with the provision that each of her sons would get a contact print from the original plate, known as an Imperial plate print. They didn't want to do it, but they had no choice," he said. "When officials of the Smithsonian saw it, they later said their 'hands were shaking' as they looked at the large piece of glass. After much discussion, she sold it to them. Good for her — she put my brother and sister through college and got me braces at the time by selling it."

Kathryn Rice Turner sold the negatives to the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery in 1983. She died in 2006.

"Moses P. Rice (1840-1925) was my great-grandfather," Turner said. "Moses and two of his brothers were photographers in Nova Scotia in the 1850s, just getting in the trade. By 1860, we know Moses was in D.C. and gets a job with Gardner. He became a well-known photographer, very artistic in his work. Photographers were able to fool around with the negative and do retouching, and Moses seems to have been very talented in that field. There is a notation on the bottom of some of his (or Gardner's) work that the picture 'is the only unretouched picture of Abraham Lincoln.' "

Just how Rice came to own the Lincoln portraits and other prominent photographs from Gardner's studio may remain an unsolved mystery. Rice is believed to have worked with Gardner perhaps between 1863 and 1865. Did he compose the shots, expose the plate or simply produce the final glass image? Did he acquire the plates directly from Gardner, or several years after the famous photographer's death?

"Did he take the Lincoln photographs or did he simply 'take' the negatives from Gardner's studio? Did he purchase them from Gardner when he went out of business? That's the question," Turner said. "Gardner went on hard economic times. Gardner ended up almost broke, so probably he had to sell his stuff."

"You'd think we would all be sitting around the table talking about the time Moses P. Rice took Lincoln's picture, but I never heard it mentioned. To tell you the truth, I don't think my mom was very much interested in that part of family history. My great-grandfather died when she was 13, and I don't think she asked him questions, and if he spoke about it, I don't think she listened," he said.

As for Turner, he also has a small glass copy plate of another portrait in glass of the president and is hoping to produce custom-made copies from his historic glass negative.

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